

Imperial College Union
Proposal for redesign of the ICU website

A paper by Christian Carter and Alex Mckee

Deputy President (Finance & Services) and Communications & Sponsorship Coordinator

Introduction

ICU and the OTHER media have been working in partnership on the ICU website since March 2006. The site has proved a huge success; becoming the most visited Student Union website in the UK and taking over £1.2m in online transactions. Many of these transactions have been Clubs & Societies products and memberships. In fact, during this academic year over 75 per cent of all Clubs & Societies memberships have been purchased online.

In November 2007, we added extra functionality for Clubs & Societies' Officers to add, manage and report their own products on the site. This has proved successful again and has increased the number of Clubs & Societies products sold by over 150 per cent since its introduction.

The focus and role of the site has evolved greatly since its launch in June 2006 – with the site outgrowing the original specification. Many assumptions made by ICU, in consultation with key-stakeholders, about the design of the site now need some revision, with under-used sections weakening the impact of the site.

The key realisation is that the site's prime objective is to enable Clubs & Societies to engage with their members; allowing them to join and purchase products – this has necessitated a revision of the current information architecture. Our redesign proposal aims to address the IA issues whilst preparing the site for the next three years of service.

ICU and the OTHER media have been working jointly to analyse user behaviour across the current site and looking at the best design solution to serve members in future.

Aims of the Site Redesign

- ***Re-alignment of core focus of the site***

By analysing the usage on the website over the last three years and the trends of our users, we've gathered a clear picture of the way the site is actually used. We launched the site as a mainly news and information site for ICU, which also sold online products.

Clubs & Societies were each given their own area of the site and their own shop - these have been well used and represent one of the most popular parts of the site. Indeed, the most used page on the site, apart from the homepage, is the Clubs & Societies A-Z.

With this redesign, we would make Clubs & Societies and their activities the core focus of the site. We would bring randomly-selected Clubs & Societies profiles up to the homepage, allowing people to discover Clubs & Societies that they may otherwise have never heard about. Clubs & Societies news and events feeds, written and published by the Clubs & Societies Officers, would also be shown on the homepage. With an improved Clubs & Societies landing page we would continue to highlight the large amount of content produced by the Clubs & Societies, which previously was hidden four or five levels down in the site.

The site already contains the functionality for each club and society to have their own News and Events stream, similar to the one the main Union has on the site currently. We would just need to switch this functionality on and encourage Clubs & Societies to publish their news and events.

The homepage would also feature a new media area, showcasing videos and images associated with Imperial College London and the Union. These would be pulled from Flickr and YouTube streams and channels populated in partnership with College's Digital Media staff. Clubs & Societies and students would be actively encouraged to submit their videos and tag their photos so that we can include these on the homepage. The college would also look to incorporate these media streams on their website, specifically on the 'Campus Life' landing page, introducing rich media content to fall in line with the ICU's new site.

- ***Streamlined Design***

From our site analysis we've identified that many of the links in the primary navigation are rarely used. By reducing the number of links in the primary navigation and by looking at the placement of site functionality we can create a less vertically cluttered site; placing the most commonly used tools in the most efficient and recognisable places, while improving usability with tabs.

Current	Proposed	Reason
Home		The logo will take you home
Events	Events	
Clubs & Societies	Clubs & Societies	
News	News	
Information & Advice	Information & Advice	
Forums		Underused
Purchase	Shop	Unintuitive name
Links		Moved to footer
Contact Us		Moved to footer
Democracy	Representation	Clearer title?
New Students		Only relevant at certain times of the year
Alumni		Underused
Student Officers		Overlap with Democracy
Union Services	Union Services	

Of the sections removed from primary navigation, none will be deleted fully from the site. Each area will be incorporated within other sections to give a logical grouping structure and intuitive navigation.

To take advantage of the capability of most of our users' computers the site would be widened from the current 760px to nearer 980px. This gives us greater scope for content on the site, especially on home and section landing pages.

Navigation will also be improved in response to one of the major criticisms of the current site. Secondary navigation would appear in a left-hand vertical navigation, with the added flexibility of a tertiary level of navigation within relevant secondary sections to promote consistency. Breadcrumbs would also be utilised to give path information. The sub-navigation and breadcrumb would be representative of the page's position in the backend file structure.

This will remove the current issue of pages losing their sub-navigation if navigated directly to or found through the search function.

The search and user controls such as the account/basket option would be moved to the top of the site; a move obvious and 'global position' – in line with recognised protocols on ecommerce site. When a user is logged in, there will be a 'My Clubs & Societies' link with an overlay listing the user's memberships and links to the relevant Clubs & Societies landing page to improve navigation efficiency.

The login box would be moved to the top of each page on the site. By moving the login box we would free-up valuable space on each page. The login box would be prominent and in a colour that makes it easy to find. When the user clicks on the login box an overlay would appear allowing them to enter their ICU username and password. This overlay will also contain clear steps for new users to join the site and alumni to use their CID and Date of Birth in order to login. Once the user is logged in the button will disappear and be replaced with the user's account information, Clubs & Societies and also their current basket buttons; again all linking to overlays with further information.

- ***Dynamic User Content Profiling***

An obvious and effective way of making the site content more useful is to tailor it to the user. We can personalise a user's experience of the site by using the information that we know about them. For example the Clubs & Societies they have joined and the products they have already purchased etc. This information would be easily accessible from the Basket, My account and My Clubs & Societies section at the top of the site above the banner.

- ***Improved shopping process***

Due to the convenience of buying Clubs & Societies merchandise, event tickets and memberships from the online shop an increase in online sales has occurred, changing the focus of the site for many of our users. To maximise this potential we would redesign the shop to accommodate and encourage further growth, allowing for cross-selling and up-selling, whilst simplifying the buying process with a single page checkout. Using this type of checkout process reduces the steps and therefore increases the likelihood of the customer converting to purchase.

To maximise cross and up-selling potential on the site 'dynamic shop' functionality would be introduced, which prioritises products from Clubs &

Societies that the user has joined, on the homepage and product pages. This will increase product awareness and the chance of spontaneous product purchase.

The basket would also be revisited so that it utilises overlay technology, reducing the on-page space required. Users will be able to modify the contents of their basket 'on the fly'.

- ***Opportunity for increased advertising income***

The new design would allow for large advertising banners that are becoming more 'industry standard' as well as the current 468x60px banners that the site currently offers. A two-tiered pricing structure would be introduced with graduate recruiters expected to take advantage of this higher impact option, further increasing the possibility of incoming revenue.

- ***Focus on site drivers***

The main drivers of the site would have greater precedence. The Clubs & Societies landing page (which currently has no additional functionality), Events and Retail would benefit from increased prominence and cross-selling around the site. The streamlined navigation options and clearer naming conventions would funnel users to their desired goals in less clicks, while allowing for the promotion of other products or site sections that may be of interest to the user.

- ***Inclusion of information streams***

The new design would include the ability to add, edit and remove RSS feeds on a homepage AJAX widget. These would initially include ICU news and events RSS feeds, Union and College Twitter feeds and Student Union Media feeds. The widget would also contain updates from the new Sabbatical Blogs that are due to launch in July.

A new 'Notices' section would also be on the homepage. These notices would be designed to highlight events, pieces of information or articles relevant to users which don't merit a news story in their own right. The notices would simply have a title, a small abstract and then a link to either an internal webpage or external website. ICU Staff and Sabbaticals would administer these notices.

- ***Building the site for the future***

As part of the redesign, the OTHER media will be rebuilding all of the templates that the site currently utilises. This is being implemented for a number of reasons.

Firstly, due to advancements in web interface technologies, we will be able to implement some of the more modern and dynamic tools allowing us to have AJAX powered widgets, sliders and dashboards more easily than on the current site. Content can be pulled in at the users request from across the site into one central page, allowing for 'content within content' and giving the user more of what they want in one place.

Secondly page performance can be increased using a scripting method called 'Ojay', which has been developed in-house by the OTHER media and is now used across the digital industry. This approach means that the site can now incorporate newer technologies, as they are developed 'dropped in' rather than using ground-up integration.

The burden of research and development is spread across the OTHER media clients for shared components, meaning that progress made on other high profile sites can be brought into the ICU site with few complications. The result is a reduction in future development costs and timescales. Usability also benefits from these changes, as the user will find what they need much more quickly, with content now being fed to where they are instead of digging deep to find it.

Proposed Designs

See Appendix.

Proposed Timescale

Assuming sign off by 5 May 2009, then we would aim to have the site tested and live by the beginning of August 2009.

Costs

37.5 days development time

£26,225 (excluding VAT charged at 15 per cent)

Alex Mckee (ICU) & Alex Barnett (tOm) – April 2009